

The Poetry of Religious Paradox — T. S. Eliot and the Metaphysicals

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It is well known that Eliot was deeply impressed by the poetry and by the dramatic verse of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; it is also well known that he came to experience a growing allegiance to the doctrines and rituals of the Church of England, an institution which flowered at the time when those much admired poets were producing their best work. It is reasonable, therefore, that Eliot's verse should demonstrate signs of both influences, the literary and the spiritual, the cultural and the religious, to such an extent, indeed, that it is frequently impossible to determine whether a particular poem or passage relies on the works of those poets or on the rituals and teachings of religion. In all probability, the best of Eliot's overtly or implicitly religious verse relies on both, and fuses their elements into an independent, individual and harmonious whole. That the fourth section of "Little Gidding" recalls the poetry of Herbert and Vaughan may be less important than its clear dedication to the doctrinal stand of High Anglicanism:

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
That intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

Occasionally, nevertheless, we come upon certain poems which represent something other than the rich fusion of cultural and ecclesiastical traditions. In those poems, and there are not many in the canon, we may discern imitations (in the respectable sense of that term) of the old masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One such poem is "The Journey of the Magi", not one of Eliot's best, perhaps, but notable because it allows us to glimpse the manner in which he employed the models provided by Donne and Herbert, to whom, in different ways, this poem might have been dedicated.

The poem recalls, in general, the emblem tradition which stands behind so much seventeenth-century religious verse, and a particular poem of Donne—or more probably the *topos* behind it, the spiritual journey. This close parallel (not necessarily a

source in the narrow sense of the term) is Donne's great spiritual meditation "Good Friday 1613, Riding Westward", a poem so well known and so often praised that it would be perverse to suppose that Eliot was unfamiliar with it. The conceit behind both poems is a journey performed in harmony with, but in an equally valid sense against or in contrary motion to, one of the great festivals of Christianity. In Donne's poem, after six lines concerned with a highly "learned" analogy between human life and the movement and behaviour of the heavenly bodies, this conceit is announced in an unemphatic, almost off-hand way:

Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this,
The intelligence that moves, devotion is,
And as the other Spheares, by being growne
Subject to forraigne motions, lose their own,
And being by others hurried every day,
Scarce in a yeare their naturall forme obey:
Pleasure or businesse, so, our Soules admit
For their first mover, and are whirld by it.
Hence is't, that I am carryed towards the West,
This day, when my Soules forme bends towards the East.

Later in the poem, this paradox—that the poet is travelling on this day in a direction away from Jerusalem, whither his thought and devotions ought to be directed—is elaborated in the larger and more profound paradox which permits the poem to discover and celebrate not merely the significance of this season, but also the fitness of riding westward, away from the place of Christ's passion, on Good Friday.

Oh Saviour, as thou hang'st upon the tree;
I turne my backe to thee, but to receive
Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.
O thinke me worth thine anger, punish me,
Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,
Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,
That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face.

Thus the opposed aspects of Easter, the redemptive and the penitential, are reconciled by the manner in which the paradoxical situation at the beginning (the secular journey westward) is aligned with the triumphant recognition, at the end of the poem, that this is, indeed, just and fitting. But this, too, reveals deeply paradoxical possibilities in the recognition that penitence and rejoicing, sacrifice and resurrection become indistinguishable when fused in the mystery of Christ's agony:

There I should see a Sunne, by rising set,
And by that setting endlesse day beget;
But that Christ on this Crosse, did rise and fall,
Sinne had eternally benighted all.

Writing some three hundred years after Donne, Eliot no longer had access to that rich vein of punning seriousness with which Donne enhanced and strengthened his devotional meditation. In the twentieth century the sun/son homonym or the insistence on the strict meaning of "benighted" may not be employed with the gravity Donne was capable of bringing to the solemn wordplay of his Easter poem. But "The Journey of the Magi" may, nevertheless, embody a spiritual journey as a poetic and religious conceit, and it may elaborate the apparent contradictions within the Christian mystery that such a paradox reveals. The opening of Eliot's poem is as seemingly irrelevant to its title as Donne's. In each case, of course, the title itself provides a clue or guide whereby the reader may understand the connection between the alleged subject-matter and the curious opening.

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'

This low-keyed, unemphatic matter-of-factness (the dull accents of the commonplace traveller's tale) is carefully judged: the "un-poetic" language assumes deep reverberations in phrases such as "cold coming" and "The very dead of winter". The poem's decorum becomes most appropriate and fitting to its subject. To take the latter first: the journey of the wise men to worship the infant Christ is of course replete with elements from folk-tales and similar material. Thereby the profound mystery of the Incarnation is transformed into the homely, comfortable charm of the Christmas tale, as in the sophisticated naïveté of Heine's poem "Die Heiligen drei Könige aus Morgenland",¹ which Eliot may have known. With considerable wit, it seems to me, Eliot finds a modern equivalent for the folksiness of this tradition in the flat-toned complaints of the archetypal modern traveller. But the effect is not merely decorative or whimsical; for just as the seemingly irrelevant opening of "Good Friday 1613, Riding Westward" comes to be justified by the poem's textures of meaning and suggestion, so the opening measure of the later poem comes to be

1 The following is a prose translation of Heine's poem. "The three holy Kings from the East asked in every township: 'Which is the way to Bethlehem, dear boys and girls?' The young and the old did not know; the Kings travelled on; they followed a golden star which shone happily and brightly. The star stopped over Joseph's house, so they went inside; the little ox bellowed, the baby cried, the three holy Kings sang."

aligned with its central assertion—that for the modern “wise man” the significance of the Incarnation must be contained within an awareness of Christ’s sacrifice. This may also be put in terms of the poem’s conceit: a journey to Bethlehem must, for us, be via Golgotha.

This conceit occupies the central section of Eliot’s poem; it is approached by means of a gradual conversion of the dull tones of the traveller’s complaint into accents more exotic: an invocation of the far-away and the fabulous.

And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.

This, as the poem’s concluding section makes clear, is the other life, one stripped of meaning and allure once man experiences Christ’s call, a banal world aptly evoked in images of a particularly cloying nature. Yet the catalogue of miseries with which the poem opens proves to be the dominant note, for the complaint returns with an account of a journey through a particular type of hell:

Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

The journey towards enlightenment is, of course, arduous; Eliot’s wise men unknowingly enact the choice of Hercules between the easy road of pleasure (the silken girls, the sherbet) and the demanding path of virtue. But there is no knowledge or recognition of the quest—no mention of the guiding star, nothing to align this painful voyage with the homely comforts of the Christmas tale. Only the statement that they preferred to travel by night indicates, albeit faintly, the implications of the title.

At the beginning of the second verse-paragraph, it seems as if the quest might have been achieved.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation,
With a running-stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky.
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.

Here is a modern instance of the ancient *topos* of the pleasant place, or *locus amoenus*, suggesting the achievement of the quest, the contentment to be gained at the end of an arduous voyage. And this is, in a sense, such a place—happy, protected; the calm beauty of the verse mirrors the placid contentment, indicating that the centre of the poem states its central concern. But this is so only in a special and particular sense, for this is not the object of the wise men's quest: this is Calvary, not Bethlehem. The place of Christ's agony is identified ominously but serenely by the three trees on the low skyline, alluding to the ancient notion of the cross as a tree (and therefore the *antitype* of Adam's tree), as in so much of the devotional poetry of the seventeenth century. The wise men witness what is in effect a foreshortened account of the central tenet of Christianity; the drama of the crucifixion is conveyed in darkly portentous terms, relying on the traditional symbolism of the Church, its liturgy and its hermeneutic practices—again, as in the poetry of Donne and Herbert:

Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.

The scene has something of the sharp-edged precision of a Brueghel painting where Biblical events are represented in terms of a stark, unsentimental "contemporary" realism. These emblems rely on the typology of the Bible as elaborated in the liturgy of the Church: the vine-leaves recall John 15.1, the image of Christ as the true vine, as in Herbert's "The Bunch of Grapes":

But can he want the grape, who hath the wine?
I have their fruit and more.
Blessed be God, who prosper's *Noahs* vine,
And made it bring forth grapes good store.
But much more him I must adore,
Who of the laws sowre juice sweet wine did make,
Ev'n God himself, being pressed for my sake.

Where the last line of Herbert's darkly allusive poem evokes the traditional emblem of Christ as the bunch of grapes within the press—an image, of course, of the Eucharist—Eliot's modern version transforms the notion into the vision of feet kicking the empty wine-skins, just as in an earlier line, and in keeping with the chronology of Christ's passion, the six hands dicing for silver fuses the images of the dispute over the seamless garment and Judas's hire.²

2 In the concluding chapter to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London 1933), Eliot wrote: "And of course only a part of an

But for Eliot's Magi the scene cannot convey its "centrality"; they cannot recognize that this is, indeed, the happy place, the culmination and justification of the miracle of Christmas:

But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

Once more, the return to the banalities of the opening of the poem, the commonplace "tourist's" voice, serves to stress the double, paradoxical perspective which is unfolding here. The Magi have no information, for historically, within the revelation of God's purposes through the sequence of human history, the significance of the crucifixion cannot be, at this point, apparent. The images of God's sacrifice, identified for us, the modern "wise men", by the iconology of worship, are meaningless for these travellers—they lack information.

But they achieve Bethlehem. It proved, we are told, satisfactory. Yet satisfaction is not the keynote of the third of the verse-paragraphs. Rather, the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the doctrine on which the poem is based, and of its own procedures as well, comes to be highlighted.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

The juxtaposition and the confounding of birth and death are familiar tools of metaphysical religious verse: we need go no farther than the sestet of Donne's Holy Sonnet X to recognize the

author's imagery comes from his reading. It comes from the whole of his sensitive life since early childhood. Why, for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? The song of one bird, the leap of one fish, at a particular place and time, the scent of one flower, an old woman on a German mountain path, six ruffians seen through an open window playing cards at a small French railway junction where there was a watermill . . ." (p. 148). Eliot might have added that such recollections, such private symbols bred from personal experiences have a way of being transformed by their *appropriateness* to what one has learnt, read or thought about. Thus "The Journey of the Magi" transforms the six ruffians into three, the window into an open doorway, and (I suggest) the railway junction into Golgotha.

strength of the tradition:

Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, warre, and sickness dwell,
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleep as well,
And better then thy stroake; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

Thus Eliot may be seen to be attempting to habituate to the modes of modern poetry the flamboyantly paradoxical spirit evident in poems such as "Death be not proud". But to do this is also to rely on the doctrines and symbolism of Christianity, that is to say, the assertion that at the birth of Christ the old dispensation passed away, that in the death of Christ man is reborn, and that only through the death of our old selves may we be born into Christ and God's forgiveness again. This type of poetry—whether of the twentieth century or the seventeenth—is intent upon displaying the paradoxes within the familiar teachings of Christianity.

But "The Journey of the Magi" goes beyond that. Eliot's narrator is a deliberately ambiguous "voice". In one way, he must be seen as one of the three Kings of the popular Christmas tale. But he is also modern man, and furthermore an enlightened one: the concluding lines of the poem indicate both the privilege and the predicament of those living in "history", beyond, that is, the time of Christ's ministry and passion. We know what the purpose was behind the Incarnation, and we, too, must journey through history towards Bethlehem, to the birth, because it is there, in the presence of the mystery of God-become-man, that the fundamentals of faith must be found. This is so, even though the miracle culminates in events as ambiguous as those that took place within the puzzling *locus amoenus* which Eliot's travellers, like modern man in his backward glance through history, reach before they achieve the object of their quest. So the poem comes to an end not in triumph but with a sense of dislocation and dissatisfaction with the "old dispensation" which (in accordance with so much mystical thought) the Christian must experience once he has received "information".

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

This ending is as paradoxically emphatic as the "punch-line" of Holy Sonnet X and the endings of many poems of that period: as in Donne's Easter poem, "Good Friday 1613", Eliot's Christmas poem exploits the disturbing contradictions between the secular

and spiritual life, while, in effect, reconciling these seemingly opposed poles. Longing for *another* death (with all its ambiguous implications) is as paradoxical as Donne's recognition at the end of the earlier poem that turning one's back on Christ and his place of death—that is travelling towards the west on Good Friday—is appropriate and justified.

To what extent, then, is Eliot's "metaphysical" account of the journey of the "wise men" an *imitation* of the religious verse of the seventeenth century? I believe that that model is very apparent here, and that it was, in all likelihood, consciously adopted. This may not be said, for instance, of "Ash Wednesday", where, despite the eclectic assemblage of images, symbols, poetic devices and the like, the synthesis is very much Eliot's own—it is a poem of a type largely without precedent, at least in English verse. By comparison, "The Journey of the Magi" is much more imitative, though I must stress that I do not mean to imply pejorative connotations in the use of this term. The imitation encompasses subject-matter, style and structure. The contemporary, colloquial tone of the poem is, of course, another instance of Eliot's admiration for the poetic practices of the early seventeenth century. But even structurally the poem declares its reliance on or acknowledgement of the religious verse of that period. From his interest in religious practices, Eliot may have been familiar with the tripartite structure of those meditative practices which Louis L. Martz³ was to identify (some years after the composition of "The Journey of the Magi") in the poetry of Donne, Herbert, Vaughan and Crashaw. The characteristics of such practices may be glimpsed in this poem: the vivid evocation of a place (*compositio loci*) is wittily incorporated in the description of Golgotha as a *locus amoenus*—for this Christmas poem is about the justification of Christmas contained within the crucifixion. Moreover, the last verse-paragraph may represent the colloquy, conventional to the ending of such spiritual exercises, as at the end of "Good Friday 1613".

Many, indeed most, of the poems in Herbert's *The Temple* are of the type usually called "emblem poems", derived from the very popular emblem books of the period, where the "meaning" of an often puzzling and obscure lyric is revealed and in a sense controlled by its title. The most familiar and best loved of Herbert's poems—"The Pearl", "The Collar", "The Bag", "The Pulley"—

3 L. L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven 1954).

are precisely of this sort, as is "The Bunch of Grapes" which, because of its extreme complexity of allusion and emblematic reference, has not enjoyed the popularity of some of the other poems in the cycle. In these poems Herbert relies on the tradition of those puzzling pictures which may only be explained by reference to the moral or at times overtly theological poems the emblem writers appended to them in their compilations. At times, as in "The Pearl", the reference is overtly biblical, at others, as in "The Pulley", the conceit is revealed by the properties of the inert (often mechanical) object which represents a spiritual or moral proposition. Compared with the practices of these poets, Eliot's emblematic poetry is utterly simple, and in "The Journey of the Magi" the title reveals immediately the area of experience and speculation with which the poem deals. Simpler though Eliot's manner is, his procedures are indistinguishable from those of his seventeenth-century precursors, for one of the conceits in "The Journey of the Magi" is that the poem makes no overt reference to its subject-matter—the Nativity, the events surrounding it, and its consequences. Eliot observes here that element in the poetry of Herbert and of his imitators whereby both delight and instruction were to be gained from such deliberately obscurantist strategies. The poem is both precise and puzzling, simple and complex. It reveals, through its title, an almost naïve directness, while it evokes from its subject-matter a most complicated view of history and of the relationship between the passage of time in the secular world and the eternal purposes of Providence. Because it lacks specificity, the poem is capable of entertaining within its structure some of those fundamental questions which have occupied the endeavours of the human mind to come to terms with the propositions of religion. This is done, moreover, not by means of an overtly didactic or speculative poem of the sort that Eliot, a good disciple of *fin de siècle* French theories, detested, but by way of a poem which, in the best traditions of seventeenth-century English verse, relies on the disjunction between the apparent subject-matter (as hinted in the title) and the contents of the poem itself to allow the play of meaning and speculation. "The Journey of the Magi" may therefore be seen as Eliot's homage to the metaphysicals, an attempt to replicate within the possibilities available to the modern poet some of those effects which made their poetry so richly imaginative and satisfying. In this sense—which is also the sense carried by the term in much neo-classical thought—the poem is Eliot's affectionate imitation of the work of those much admired old masters.